

How Does a Video Game Shutdown Impact Players? Evidence from a Netnographic Case Study of the Battlefield: Bad Company 2 Shutdown

Bastian Brechtelsbauer
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg
bastian.bb.brechtelsbauer@fau.de

Tim-Julian Schwehn
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg
tim-julian.schwehn@fau.de

Sven Laumer
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg
sven.laumer@fau.de

Abstract

Although video games continue to grow in number and popularity, our understanding of the impact of video game shutdowns on players remains scarce. This is regrettable, as the forceful and permanent removal of video games likely has significant and relevant effects, given how deeply intertwined with and important for players' lives video games can be. Therefore, in this exploratory study, we present the case of the shutdown of Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (BFBC2). Following a netnographic approach, we analyze posts and comments from the BFBC2-related Reddit forum r/badcompany2 as well as 21 interviews with members. Based on this, we present six themes that capture how the shutdown influenced players and explain the role of BFBC2's Reddit community during the shutdown. Thereby, we contribute to the literature on video game shutdowns, online communities, and video game nostalgia. Finally, we provide promising avenues for future research based on our findings.

Keywords: Video games, video game shutdown, online communities, netnography, case study.

1. Introduction

While previous research has established the influence on and importance of video games for players, our understanding of the impact of permanent video game shutdowns¹ is limited, as only a few studies have investigated them, without focusing extensively on the impact on individual players (e.g., Consalvo & Begy, 2015; Pearce, 2009; Samper-Martinez et al., 2015).

This is regrettable for two reasons: First, as we will show in more detail in section 2, video games can play important roles in players' lives, relating, for example, to well-being (Granic et al., 2014; Wulf et al., 2020),

¹With "shutdown" we refer to the permanent discontinuation of the operation, e.g., the online multiplayer, of a video game by its developer or publisher, often rendering the game unplayable.

feeling nostalgia (Bowman & Wulf, 2023), or their identities (Bacchini et al., 2017). Therefore, we expect that the forceful and permanent removal of games can strongly impact players. This impact increases with the growing number of players and games (Newzoo, 2024) as most games will be shut down eventually.

Second, shutdowns provide a natural setting to observe the effects of the removal of video games, and generally information technology (IT), from one's life. This can be hard to reproduce artificially, e.g., for ethical reasons. Therefore, as IT becomes increasingly intertwined with our lives, shutdowns allow us to investigate human relationships with IT more deeply, as "often you only know what you had once it is gone".

To these ends, in this exploratory study, we investigate the multifaceted impact of a video game shutdown on players by asking:

RQ1: *How does the shutdown of a video game impact its players?*

To answer this question, we present the case of the popular first-person shooter Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (BFBC2) that was shut down by its publisher Electronic Arts (EA) in December 2023. We adopt a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015), analyzing posts and comments from a BFBC2 community on the social media site Reddit, along with 21 online interviews with community members. This also allows us to investigate the role of online communities throughout a shutdown, as we ask:

RQ2: *What role do online communities play during the shutdown of a video game?*

The primary findings of this study are six themes and 16 sub-themes that capture the reactions to BFBC2's shutdown and illustrate its multifaceted and diverse impacts on players. Moreover, we explain how players utilized Reddit to inform themselves, organize, and support each other. Thereby, we contribute to literature on video game shutdowns, online communities, and video game nostalgia. Reflecting the study's exploratory character, we provide several avenues for future research.

2. Background

Given the exploratory nature of this study, this section provides an overview of different streams of literature, without focusing on a single aspect.

2.1. The role of video games for players

Players often invest substantial amounts of time, financial resources, and energy in video games. For many, gaming is driven by hedonic motivations and serves as a leisure activity that allows them to escape from the mundane aspects of their daily lives. As such, video games have the potential to increase players' positive mood and decrease their negative mood (Barnett & Coulson, 2010). Research has shown that a player's emotional state is influenced by different game characteristics that act as affordances for different experiences (Barnett & Coulson, 2010; Lee et al., 2021; Yee, 2006): Social affordances provide opportunities for players to engage in teamwork activities, experience social exchange and collaboration, and form meaningful relationships. Immersion affordances allow players to become deeply involved in the game through activities such as role-playing and in-game character customization, offering a personalized gaming experience that contributes to escaping from real-life challenges. Achievement affordances, such as collecting in-game resources, completing in-game missions, advancing to higher levels, or competing with others, provide players with rewarding experiences. Such activities not only lead to satisfying gameplay experiences but also increase players' sense of self-worth and validate their competence, thereby contributing to an overall sense of fulfillment (Barnett & Coulson, 2010; Granic et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2021). Reward systems also allow players to view their accumulated virtual resources or achievements, an important aspect for active and inactive players (Wang & Sun, 2011). Further, past gaming experiences are a source of feelings of nostalgia which can positively influence subjective and psychological well-being (Wulf et al., 2020). In this context, the literature differentiates between personal (own experiences) and historical (past eras) nostalgia (Bowman & Wulf, 2023).

For a growing number of players, however, gaming has moved beyond its role as a leisure activity and deeply permeates various aspects of their lives and selves. Previous literature has highlighted the potential of games to impact a player's identities (Bacchini et al., 2017). Theoretically, this can, for example, include one's social (Tajfel & Turner, 1986),

role (Burke & Stets, 2023), person (Burke & Stets, 2023), and IT identities (M. Carter & Grover, 2015). To illustrate, image Luke who identifies himself as a member of a gaming clan (social identity), a skilled sniper (role identity), a strategic thinker in both games and life (person identity), and views playing BFBC2 itself as part of who he is (IT identity).

2.2. The role of communities for players

Regarding the social dimensions of games, players often interact beyond the boundaries of a game. Online platforms, such as Reddit, have become central hubs for social interaction, providing spaces for players to connect, share information, and support each other (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021; Consalvo & Begy, 2015; Pearce, 2009). Here, players often engage with games creatively, for example, by producing and sharing game-related content, in-game stories, or game modifications. Especially in times of change and transition, online communities can play an important role for players by providing a space to debate the game and discuss what the changes mean to them personally (Braithwaite, 2014). For example, Bergstrom and Poor (2021) investigated online communities during times of transition and examined whether players leave an online community when a new version of a game is released. The authors found that many people did not immediately switch to new subreddits but remain in their old communities. Furthermore, Poor and Skoric (2014) found that while a guild disbanded in-game, some members continued to maintain their connections through other online communities. Even though their interests shifted to newer games, they remained invested in their social relationships. These findings indicate that established ties within a community are stronger than the appeal of new content, highlighting their importance for players (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021; Poor & Skoric, 2014). Unlike the live interactions in a video game, communication on platforms like Reddit is typically asynchronous, with posts being archived and persistent, unless removed by the user. As such, revisiting old communication, e.g., posts and comments, allows players to recall past experiences, which can evoke feelings of nostalgia (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021; Bowman & Wulf, 2023).

However, it is important to note that games and their communities are not equally accessible to all. While some may freely choose not to engage, research has shown that various barriers, such as gender, ethnicity, or economic disadvantages, can exclude individuals (Bergstrom, 2019; Gray, 2012).

2.3. Video game shutdowns and (information) technology loss

As information technologies become increasingly intertwined with our lives, some research has explored the effects of their removal. Investigating communities during video game shutdowns, Consalvo and Begy (2015) described how community members expressed grief, shared memories, and moved on to new games, while Pearce (2009) focuses on how a community changed after a shutdown. Focusing on an individual perspective, Samper-Martinez et al. (2015) use a co-creation lens to explain why players may express anger towards a publisher if they feel that something they helped build is taken from them.

In the context of the loss of a robot, studies explained how differently individuals experience such a loss (Banks, 2022) and how it can even be similar to the death of humans or animals (E. J. Carter et al., 2020). Recently, Banks (2024) examined the experiences of individuals who lost their artificial intelligence companion due to a developer-imposed shutdown. The study reveals that the loss was experienced by individuals as a “complex emotional and technological experience characterized as a metaphorical or literal death” (Banks, 2024, p. 1).

Against this backdrop, we aim to investigate the phenomenon of video game shutdowns by exploring their impact on players as individuals, while also considering the role of gaming communities.

3. Method

To answer our research questions, we follow a qualitative, exploratory approach. Given our personally and socially constructed topic within the online gaming world, we conduct an interpretive case study (Walsham, 1995) using netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography allows us to closely explore a video game’s shutdown through archived online interactions, making it naturalistic, non-intrusive, and cost-effective (Kozinets, 2002). Further, combining different data sources, including online posts and in-depth interviews, enriches our understanding.

3.1. Case description

BFBC2 is a military-style shooter game that immerses players in combat from a first-person perspective. Developed by Digital Illusions CE (DICE), BFBC2 was published by EA in March 2010 for multiple platforms, including PC, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360. With at least 9 million copies sold within the first 1.5 years (Electronic Arts, 2011), it was a

considerable success. The game features both a single-player campaign and an online multiplayer mode. As such, it allows players to either play solo or compete in teams of four to sixteen players. On March 21st, 2023, EA announced the shutdown of BFBC2, with online sales ending and the online services being deactivated by December 8th, 2023. Importantly, PC players can continue to play online via Project Rome, an independently developed server infrastructure.

BFBC2 is a well-suited case for our study because it represents an important game genre of video games, and its recent shutdown and active community allowed us to investigate the shutdown as it emerged.

3.2. Data collection

Our study is based on three data sources, see Table 1: The subreddit *r/badcompany2*, 21 interviews with BFBC2 players, and our immersion journal.

Table 1. Data overview

Data site	Type and amount of data
Reddit	306 posts and 2361 comments from <i>r/badcompany2</i> between 1/1/23 and 6/3/24
Interviews	Transcripts and notes from 21 interviews with <i>r/badcompany2</i> members (details in Table 2)
Immersion journal	Notes and sketches of attention-grabbing, interesting, and discussion-worthy topics

r/badcompany2 is platform independent, making it a central hub for over 8200 members, offering us a rich variety of data, including text, videos, and images. We collected every post with its respective comments from January 1st, 2023 to June 3rd, 2024, a total of 306 posts and 2361 comments. This allowed us to capture the situation from the pre-announcement phase until six months after the shutdown to develop a better understanding of its long-term impact. We used screenshots to preserve the immersive and realistic effect, resulting in more than 660 pages. To adhere to ethical standards, we ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of informants, incorporated informants’ feedback, and asked for permission for direct quotations (Anne-Marie et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2002). Else, our role as researchers remained passive to preserve the naturalistic context and not to disturb social dynamics.

To augment our data, we further conducted 21 semi-structured interviews. To recruit interviewees, we made one post in *r/badcompany2* and contacted

members directly. Hence, all participants were members of *r/badcompany2* and represented diverse backgrounds and gaming experiences, spanning different countries, age groups, and gaming platforms, however, all were male. For an overview see Table 2. The interviews were conducted virtually and ranged from 40 minutes to 150 minutes, with an average of 71 minutes. Their length varied largely, as we remained open-minded, let interviewees share freely, and explored new topics as they emerged. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of four sections with mostly open-ended questions: An introduction to participants and their gaming background, experiences in and the connection to BFBC2, perceptions of and reactions to the shutdown, and the role of Reddit during the shutdown. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, we kept taking notes as a basis for later discussions.

3.3. Data analysis and interpretation

Analyzing data “means breaking a phenomenon down into its component parts” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 198). To achieve this, we applied inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), and coded our transcripts and Reddit data using MAXQDA. Employing an inductive, data-driven approach, we did not rely on a predetermined coding framework, and tried to avoid preconceived notions.

The different phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation were closely related and involved multiple iterations (Kozinets, 2015). As such, analysis and interpretation started at an early stage of this research as we got a first glimpse of the shutdown by browsing *r/badcompany2* and reviewing our resulting immersion journal notes. Then, we iteratively merged different data sources into a single whole.

Each week, the first two authors met to critically reflect, and discuss our findings. Given that “analysis in netnography deliberately and consciously reflects the human perspective of the researcher” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 69), we benefited from the diverse perspectives of the authors. Author 1, being a BFBC2 player, was able to contribute domain knowledge of BFBC2, offering insights into the game’s language and various in-game experiences. Meanwhile, the other authors, who were not BFBC2 players, provided complementary perspectives, allowing us to examine our findings from multiple angles. However, none of the authors were active *r/badcompany2* members. We tried to critically reflect on personal assumptions and approach the data analysis with an open mind. Through our discussion, we refined our

understanding of the shutdown and synthesized the concepts into six themes and 16 sub-themes, based on their keyness and prevalence (Braun & Clarke, 2006), see Table 3.

4. Findings: The impact of the BFBC2 shutdown and the role of Reddit

In this section, we present the themes and sub-themes of players’ reactions to the shutdown that reflect the impact it had on them. For an overview of themes and examples, see Table 3. With shutdown, we refer to the entire phase starting from the announcement until the actual shutdown itself, capturing it in its entirety. The importance of these two events is further evidenced by the activity in *r/badcompany2*, as the announcement caused a peak followed by months of increased activity and another peak around the shutdown, see Figure 1.

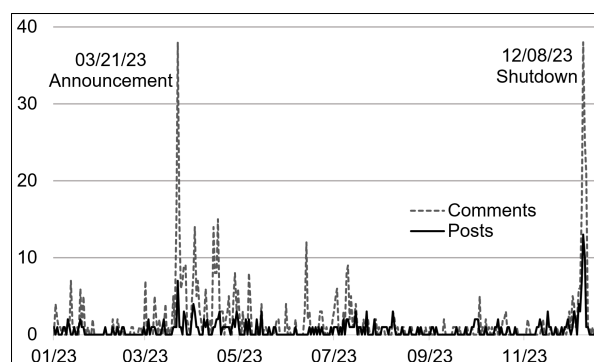


Figure 1. Number of comments and posts in *r/badcompany2* in 2023²

4.1. Engaging the shutdown

Stopping the shutdown. Right after the shutdown announcement on March 21st, 2023, once the information spread in the BFBC2 subreddit and the initial shock had passed, some members tried to convince EA not to shut down the game. Attempts included signing and distributing petitions that achieved over 500 signatures³ or sending messages directly, as P12 recalled: “*I’ve been involved in some mass mailings to EA and DICE with others. [...] But nothing ever got any response. [...] which I honestly find disappointing.*”

Continuing after the shutdown. Others focused on continually providing technical support,

²The displayed data was retrieved on 6/2/2024 from: <https://subredditsstats.com/r/badcompany2>

³For more information regarding the petition, see: <https://www.change.org/p/save-bad-company-2-online-features>

encouraging, and convincing players to start playing on the Project Rome servers in an attempt to keep the game alive after the shutdown. This is evidenced by various posts and comments about setting up and playing Project Rome, especially after the official shutdown. We provide more details on players' transitions to Project Rome in subsection 4.5.

4.2. Sense of loss

Due to the inherent loss a shutdown causes, feeling a sense of loss is an expected reaction. However, its dimensions and intensity differed severely.

Ability to play. One of the most common sub-themes was losing the ability to play the game, albeit for different reasons. Some players missed the ability to play and relax as a contrast to their daily life. Others missed the game as a way of expressing themselves, as P9 explained: *"My competitive, neurotic part of me that always wants to be expressed [...] I don't really uh have that outlet anymore so it kind of forced me to be a different person."* Moreover, some interviewees that did not play actively referred to it as losing a *"safety net"* (P1), they could always go back to.

Statistics and achievements. Many players mentioned losing access to their statistics and achievements in the game as a reflection of the effort and time they put into the game, as well as a representation of themselves and their abilities or unique playstyle. Accordingly, many appreciated a community member's project that archived the in-game statistics of millions of players.

Social connections. A lot of players lost social connections that were based on or around the game. This included relationships to other players, clans, or the community itself. For example, P9 described missing *"[t]he social interactions, just being part of a community of people who are very passionate about the game like when you feel like you're part of something bigger than yourself. It comforts you."*

Cultural artifact. A couple of players were concerned with the loss of the game as a cultural artifact that will not only be lost for them but also for future generations, as P12 described: *"But if you're interested in looking at previous games, [...] so that you can understand what people were raving about [...] that [the shutdown] actually completely eliminates the possibility for the average consumer."*

As evidenced by numerous posts, comments about missing specific aspects of the game, and our interviews, most players shared a sense of irreplaceability due to the game's permanent absence and the lack of suitable alternatives, leading to

varying degrees of sadness. Reddit allowed players to share their feelings about the shutdown, and feel understood either by receiving comments or by reading other posts and comments that resonated with them. *"If I feel like I miss the game, I go [to Reddit] just to read about other people missing it. It kind of makes me happy and I feel like I'm not alone."* (P7)

4.3. Feeling nostalgia

Triggering nostalgia. The shutdown caused the creation of numerous posts and comments containing images, videos, or memories and stories about the game. Thereby, it increased the presence of the game for many, especially less active players, and triggered feelings of nostalgia. In engaging with the game again, many players were reminded of past times, as P7 described: *"I would say I miss it quite a bit. Not that I think about it every day, but if something comes up [on Reddit] and gets me thinking about the game, I'll be like: Oh, man, I really want to go back to those days."*

Inhibiting nostalgia. Clearly, the removal of the game is not the only factor that has changed since *"those days"* (P7). But multiple interviewees explained how losing the ability to play the game also meant losing the primary way of feeling nostalgia related to the game and going back to those days. Thus, some interviewees felt like a part of their past disappeared with the shutdown. While Project Rome does provide the option to still play the game, it is not a viable option for many. Similarly, many players mentioned that game-related content, e.g., on Reddit, could not fully replace their feeling of playing and being in the game. Participating in the interview was another way for many to engage with the game and multiple interviewees mentioned feeling nostalgic.

4.4. Seeking closure

Impacted by the shutdown, many players tried to seek closure in order to be able to move on.

Playing one last time. Particularly on the last day, comparably large numbers of players came together to play for the last time. Some took pictures together while others wandered the maps by themselves, as P6 described in a five-page-long post sharing his entire BFBC2 story: *"I looked up at the large and low hanging warm sun and felt a deep appreciation for the adventures and connections I had experienced. It was a beautiful view ... and would be my last."*

Expressing oneself. P6's post also is an example of expressing oneself in order to process the shutdown. Other examples are the various posts that include aforementioned group pictures, personal stories,

tribute videos, farewell posts, and their numerous comments. Not everyone appreciated such messages though, as P16 explained: *“When I read those message, I actually got frustrated because I knew about Project Rome and I was like: Come on guys, it’s not the end.”*

Coming together. Players on Reddit shared their loss and sought closure together through posting, liking, and commenting. Some interviewees also mentioned “lurking”, engaging by reading posts without actively posting or commenting themselves. Given that several interviewees expressed sentiments similar to “others miss BFBC2 more than me”, Reddit may also offer a way to witness the suffering of others, providing solace as it relativizes one’s own feelings.

All this is not to say that everyone achieved closure quickly or ultimately, or that the shutdown may not have long-term impact, as our interview with P9, ca. half a year after the shutdown, indicates: *“I still haven’t recovered from it, to be honest. It left a hole in me.”*

4.5. Moving on

Project Rome. Despite the opportunity to keep playing the game, and the strong efforts of community members to provide guidance and promote it, many players did not transition to Project Rome, see Table 2. Some, especially console players, stopped playing after some time, naming problems with the differences between the PC and console version. Others avoided the necessary effort, or lacked trust towards the independent developers. Nevertheless, the player count of Project Rome reportedly did increase significantly after the shutdown, indicating the transition of parts of the player base.

Other games. Many interviewees, especially if they played a variety of games, described moving onto other games and various posts discussed possible replacements for BFBC2. Interestingly, very few mentioned transitioning to Battlefield 2042, that has a dedicated game mode recreating parts of BFBC2.

No more gaming. A few interviewees stopped playing games altogether after the shutdown because they couldn’t find another captivating game. Instead, some mentioned working more hours and struggling to find a way to relax and unwind from work.

4.6. Changing sentiment towards EA

Anger and disappointment. Unsurprisingly, players did not like the shutdown, reflecting much of their disapproval towards EA. While most players could understand EA’s reasoning to save money on an old game with only few players left, they still thought such a large company should keep the game alive, e.g.,

like Microsoft had done recently with the Call of Duty series. Others doubted a purely financial motivation and hypothesized that EA was trying to move players to the newer and less successful Battlefield 2042 or even punish the community for 2042’s failure.

A sliver of hope. Overall, the sentiment towards EA was overwhelmingly negative, and the outlook for an adequate remaster or sequel was largely pessimistic. However, a few players maintained hope about a potential remaster or sequel of the game and gave EA a chance to undo the damage, like P3 expressed: *“If your goal is simply to just move as many people over to the new games, then I wouldn’t support that at all. And I would disrespect EA a lot for that. But if they’re trying to remaster it or do something with it, then I would have more respect for them.”*

5. Discussion

Impact of a shutdown on players (RQ1). For most players, the shutdown of a video game is a threat that disrupts the stable and often strong connection they have developed with the game, typically over many years. Accordingly, many players react emotionally to the shutdown, expressing feelings of sadness, disappointment, and anger, e.g., towards the publisher (Samper-Martinez et al., 2015). As illustrated, a shutdown can cause a sense of loss encompassing different dimensions and intensities.

Especially for active players, this loss is tangible as their routines, relationships, and ability to express themselves may be lost. Depending on the individual and their relationship with the game, this impact can vary strongly, ranging from no perceived loss at all to losing a part of one’s identities, e.g., due to the loss of social groups, game-related roles, the ability to express personal characteristics, and the ability to play the game. Accordingly, this loss can result in a decline of well-being or potentially lead to serious mental health related issues. This raises ethical questions and questions of responsibility, given the fact that games are specifically designed to captivate and attract players. Furthermore, this is particularly critical, as players may not realize the effects of a potential shutdown when they decide to play a game because these can only be understood in the *absence* of the game. Moreover, the intensity of a shutdown’s impact on a player is positively correlated with their playtime that reflects the connection to the game and often points to a (near) exclusive focus on the game.

For inactive or irregular players, a shutdown can make a past loss, e.g., a social relationship or habit of playing the game, more salient. As the image of

a “safety net” conveys, before a shutdown, players feel like they can go back to a game, e.g., to look at in-game statistics to verify one's identity as a great player. Hence, losing this reassurance can influence players negatively. This difference between wanting the *ability to play* and *actually playing* the game is further evidenced by almost 50% of interviewees that installed Project Rome, or are planning to play it but have not yet done so, see Table 2. These findings suggest that the importance of games is not only connected to playing them but at least in part to the mere ability to play. Taking this further, we may need to reconsider what it means to be a player of a game.

Additionally, by losing the ability to play and engage with the game, players lose a source of nostalgia and well-being (Wulf et al., 2020). This mostly includes personal nostalgia, referring to their own memories connected to the game, but it also impacts historical nostalgia, as future players cannot experience gaming eras of the past. Thereby, shutdowns lead to the loss of games as cultural artifacts, an important issue that is being raised by gamers globally⁴, e.g., with a European Citizens' Initiative with over 330.000 signatures⁵.

Overall, while most players may manage to cope with a shutdown, others can be impacted severely, e.g., regarding their mental health. Further, as noted by several interviewees, economically disadvantaged individuals are disproportionately affected by shutdowns because they are more likely to rely on older games, and may find it harder to replace them.

Role of online communities in a shutdown (RQ2).

For many players, online communities such as Reddit can play an important role during a shutdown. First, they disseminate information about the shutdown itself, as well as potential ways to continue. Further, they can be a space for players to come together, whether participating actively or remaining passive. This enables players to unite and take action together, or express and share their emotions, opinions, and memories of the game with others who share their love for the game and, most importantly, understand its loss. Thereby, players can feel understood, and validate their feelings about the game, which can help to deal with the shutdown, seek closure, and move on. This is particularly important in cases where players can not find the same support in their daily lives, or from personal contacts. In a metaphorical sense, communities coming together after a video game shutdown can be compared to a funeral, as different people are brought together by a shared

and lasting loss. Some share their stories while others just listen, some may be affected more closely than others, but all share a common understanding, and a need for closure. In this context, barriers to accessing game-related communities are especially crucial because they prohibit players from using them as a resource to cope with a shutdown.

Furthermore, even beyond the shutdown, online communities can serve as a platform to share and archive game-related, nostalgic content such as videos, screenshots, and stories about the game. This may partially replace the game itself as a pathway for feeling game-related personal and historical nostalgia and preserve its legacy, also as a cultural artifact.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

With this study, we aim to primarily contribute to three bodies of literature. First, with our description of the impact of a shutdown on players we add to the limited research on understanding the phenomenon of video game shutdowns (Consalvo & Begy, 2015; Pearce, 2009; Samper-Martinez et al., 2015). Specifically, we add a shutdown-centric perspective with a special focus on the impact on individual players. We illustrate how shutdowns can lead to reduced well-being as they remove options for leisure, and can lead to feelings of loss and frustration among players. Moreover, our case study exemplifies how a video game shutdown can inhibit identity verification (Burke & Stets, 2023) and lead to identity loss, when, for example, the ability to express one's person identity through a unique playstyle is taken away. The implications of these findings can likely be extended beyond the realm of video games, e.g., into other non-game-related personal or professional contexts of using IT.

Second, our study highlights and describes the role of social communities and social community platforms, such as Reddit, during video game shutdowns. While previous research has investigated the formation, development, and disintegration of game-related online communities (e.g., Bergstrom & Poor, 2021; Pearce, 2009), our focus lies specifically on their role as support structures for individuals during times of collective distress.

Last, our paper contributes to the academic discussion of nostalgia by presenting an ambivalent account of video games shutdowns as a source but also inhibitor of media nostalgia. This is interesting, as the discussion of nostalgia is largely centered around the ability of artifacts or situations to evoke nostalgia (Bowman & Wulf, 2023). Here, our study

⁴For more information, see: <https://www.stopkillinggames.com>

⁵Find the initiative here: <https://eci.ec.europa.eu/045/public>

presents a contrasting account: While nostalgia is evoked by the shutdown and the game-related content on Reddit, our case study shows how a shutdown can render certain memories inaccessible, thereby inhibiting feelings of nostalgia and creating a need for alternative ways to experience it. Further, in the context of historical nostalgia (Bowman & Wulf, 2023), it illustrates the role and importance of video games as cultural artifacts.

5.2. Implications for practice

For developers and publishers shutdowns may seem necessary, as they want to reduce costs or refocus resources. However, they should consider the cost of the shutdown carefully, both for players, and for themselves, as the negative effect on the sentiment towards them, or the perception as greedy corporations and resulting damage to their brand may cost more than the continued operation of a game.

Second, developing more sustainable financing models, e.g., players renting servers and thereby financing the online services and necessary maintenance, may be a way to avoid shutdowns for as long as players want to play without causing additional costs for publishers.

Third, when conducting a shutdown it is important to communicate the reasons for the shutdown clearly in order to avoid confusion and overly negative interpretations. Also, organizing events, e.g., on the last day of the game, can enable players to seek closure with the shutdown. In a more general sense, publishers should think beyond adoption and consider how their games can be removed from players' lives ethically (for similar discussions in other fields see Banks (2024) and Bjorling and Riek (2022)).

Finally, the potential impact on players may also be the basis for the regulation of shutdowns, similar to the approach of the *Stop Killing Games* initiative.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Limitations. This study has two main limitations. First, due to self-selection effects on both Reddit and in our interviews, our study is likely biased towards the opinions of people that care strongly about BFBC2 and its shutdown. Therefore, this study is not representative of all players and cannot address how widespread this phenomenon is, but it can affirm its existence and relevance for some players.

Second, as Table 2 shows, while our sample is rather diverse overall, it includes only men which likely skews our findings and limits their generalizability. Being aware of these limitations, our

study can contribute valuable insights while other shortcomings can be addressed with future research.

Future research. As this is an exploratory study, it is necessary to investigate several aspects in more detail. These include, for example, quantifying the effects on well-being, brand perception, or the transitions to other games after the shutdown. Additionally, exploring the impact of shutdowns on identities appears to be interesting. While we captured a longitudinal view of the shutdown beyond its immediate impact, our interviews suggest that exploring its long-term effects is promising. Moreover, as various game genres differ significantly in their characteristics and player bases, investigating the shutdowns of other games is warranted.

6. Conclusion

In the quest of exploring the effects of video game shutdowns on players, we identified several themes explaining how the shutdown of BFBC2 impacted its players and further examined the role of Reddit during the shutdown. Thereby, we contribute to the literature on video game shutdowns, online communities, and video game nostalgia. We hope to advance this promising and important area of research and want to caution: *Video games are being designed specifically to captivate people - and then taken away from them.*

Acknowledgements

We thank the associate editor, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback. Further, we thank Xhovana Prenga, Ella Kamp, Gabriela Lenhart, and Martin Davidov for their valuable research support. Moreover, we thank our interviewees, and members of r/badcompany2 for sharing their stories with us.

References

- Anne-Marie, T., Chau, N., & Kimppa Kai, K. (2017). Ethical questions related to using netnography as research method. *The ORBIT Journal*, 1(2), 1–11.
- Bacchini, D., De Angelis, G., & Fanara, A. (2017). Identity formation in adolescent and emerging adult regular players of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). *Computers in Human Behavior*, 73, 191–199.
- Banks, J. (2022). Legacies and last words: Exploring expressed experiences of robot death. *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 3(4), 1–12.

- Banks, J. (2024). Deletion, departure, death: Experiences of AI companion loss. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 0(0), 1–26.
- Barnett, J., & Coulson, M. (2010). Virtually real: A psychological perspective on massively multiplayer online games. *Review of General Psychology*, 14(2), 167–179.
- Bergstrom, K. (2019). Barriers to play: Accounting for non-participation in digital game play. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(6), 841–857.
- Bergstrom, K., & Poor, N. (2021). Reddit gaming communities during times of transition. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2), 1–12.
- Bjorling, E., & Riek, L. D. (2022). Designing for exit: How to let robots go. *Proceedings of We Robot 2022*.
- Bowman, N. D., & Wulf, T. (2023). Nostalgia in video games. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 49, 101544.
- Braithwaite, A. (2014). 'Seriously, get out': Feminists on the forums and the War(craft) on women. *New Media & Society*, 16(5), 703–718.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2023). *Identity theory: Revised and expanded*. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, E. J., Reig, S., Tan, X. Z., Laput, G., Rosenthal, S., & Steinfeld, A. (2020). Death of a robot: Social media reactions and language usage when a robot stops operating. *2020 15th ACM/IEEE international conference on human-robot interaction (HRI)*, 589–597.
- Carter, M., & Grover, V. (2015). Me, my self, and I(T): Conceptualizing information technology identity and its implications. *MIS Quarterly*, 39(4), 931–957.
- Consalvo, M., & Begy, J. (2015). *Players and their pets: Gaming communities from beta to sunset*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Electronic Arts. (2011). Electronic arts reports q1 fy12 financial results. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20110807213559/http://investor.ea.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=594196>
- Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. M. E. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. *American Psychologist*, 69(1), 66–78.
- Gray, K. L. (2012). Intersecting oppressions and online communities. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(3), 411–428.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61–72.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined*. SAGE Publications.
- Lee, Z. W. Y., Cheung, C. M. K., & Chan, T. K. H. (2021). Understanding massively multiplayer online role playing game addiction: A hedonic management perspective. *Information Systems Journal*, 31(1), 33–61.
- Newzoo. (2024). Global games market report: January 2024. Retrieved February 24, 2024, from <https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/newzoo-global-games-market-report-2023-free-version>
- Pearce, C. (2009). *Communities of play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds*. MIT Press.
- Poor, N., & Skoric, M. M. (2014). Death of a fuild, birth of a network: Online community ties within and beyond code. *Games and Culture*, 9(3), 182–202.
- Samper-Martinez, A., Gerling, K., Garcia-Alvarez, E., Kirman, B., & Lawson, S. (2015). "After all the time I put into this": Co-creation and the end-of-life of social network games. *Proceedings of the 2015 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 135–140.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed, pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall Publishers.
- Walsham, G. (1995). Interpretive case studies in IS research: Nature and method. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 4(2), 74–81.
- Wang, H., & Sun, C.-T. (2011). Game reward systems: Gaming experiences and social meanings. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play*.
- Wulf, T., Bowman, N. D., Velez, J. A., & Breuer, J. (2020). Once upon a game: Exploring video game nostalgia and its impact on well-being. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 9(1), 83–95.
- Yee, N. (2006). Motivations for play in online games. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 9(6), 772–775.

Appendix

Table 2. Interview overview, *not recorded

Id.	Age	Gender	Country	Platform(s)	Playtime	Project Rome	Date	Duration
P1	44	M	Sweden	PC	ca. 2500 h	Not planning	01/18/24	76 min.
P2	28	M	Australia	PC	ca. 800 h	Installed it	02/02/24	70 min.
P3	25	M	USA	Xbox	ca. 500 h	Planning	02/02/24	73 min.
P4	17	M	USA	Xbox	ca. 750 h	Installed it	02/17/24	52 min.
P5	30	M	USA	Xbox	ca. 400 h	Not planning	02/24/24	150 min.*
P6	45	M	Canada	PlayStation	ca. 4500 h	Not planning	05/12/24	97 min.
P7	22	M	Norway	Xbox, PC	ca. 1500 h	Playing	05/15/24	47 min.
P8	58	M	USA	PC	ca. 2500 h	Planning	05/17/24	43 min.
P9	34	M	USA	PlayStation, PC	ca. 4900 h	Playing	05/17/24	75 min.
P10	32	M	USA	Xbox	ca. 1000 h	Stopped playing	05/17/24	via text
P11	28	M	Germany	PC	ca. 1000 h	Playing	05/18/24	74 min.
P12	34	M	Austria	Xbox	ca. 2000 h	Stopped playing	05/18/24	55 min.
P13	28	M	USA	PlayStation	ca. 1100 h	Planning	05/18/24	58 min.
P14	30	M	USA	PlayStation	ca. 240 h	Planning	05/18/24	70 min.
P15	23	M	Germany	PC	ca. 250 h	Playing	05/19/24	60 min.
P16	30	M	Brazil	PC	ca. 1000 h	Stopped playing	05/20/24	60 min.
P17	35	M	USA	PlayStation, Xbox	ca. 140 h	Not planning	05/20/24	55 min.
P18	27	M	Norway	PC	ca. 1200 h	Playing	05/21/24	93 min.
P19	29	M	USA	Xbox	ca. 290 h	Planning	05/22/24	59 min.
P20	30	M	UK	PlayStation, PC	ca. 700 h	Planning	05/26/24	76 min.
P21	30	M	USA	PlayStation	ca. 300 h	Planning	05/28/24	via text

Table 3. Theme overview

Theme	Example quotes
Engaging the shutdown	"I've been involved in some mass mailings to EA and DICE with others. [...] But nothing ever got any response. [...] which I honestly find disappointing." - P12 "I participated in petitions. If you write to developer now, you're basically ignored." - P15
Sense of loss	"Even though I wasn't particularly interested in pursuing the various achievements and challenges in the game, knowing that those would no longer be something I could pursue ... I was like, oh, I'm really sort of not feeling great about that. It's quite surprising." - P2 "I hate the shutdown. It has made my life extremely unrewarding and boring." - P9 "Oh, man, all that time I spent and they erased all of it." - P13
Feeling nostalgia	"I subscribed to the subreddit for Bad Company 2 probably partly out of that having nostalgia and I only subscribed to it when I saw the news of the shutdown." - P2 "You know, that little kernel of what you remember is going to be gone. But [...] I knew Project Rome existed. I knew it wasn't the absolute end of ever seeing this game." - P19
Seeking closure	"I played one last game and I uninstalled it because it had been installed on my computer since the day I bought it. I got to let go, I cannot really be sad about it anymore." - P1 "I wanted one last time to go in [the game] just for final closure. [...] Writing [that essay] gave me closure because I was able to write my experience down on paper and share it." - P6
Moving on	"Project Rome [...] it's the same maps, it's the same gunplay but it feels different." - P9 "[Tribute posts mostly] annoyed me because it gave the impression to newcomers [...] that after the shutdown, there is no way to continue [playing] online." - P18
Changing sentiment towards EA	"EA is huge, they're making billions out of these games [...] so it is greedy." - P1 "Removing the multiplayer, when you have other companies like Microsoft doing the opposite with Xbox and putting Call of Duty back [...] for a lot of players, that sends a message." - P3 "I knew they had a shit reputation, but it was my first experience [...]" - P10